



LEEDS  
BECKETT  
UNIVERSITY

---

Citation:

Burroughs, RM (2015) Weird farang thing: dark tourism in Alex Garland's The Beach (1996). Postcolonial Studies, 17 (3). 320 - 333. ISSN 1368-8790 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2014.987896>

Link to Leeds Beckett Repository record:

<https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/1697/>

Document Version:

Article (Accepted Version)

---

The aim of the Leeds Beckett Repository is to provide open access to our research, as required by funder policies and permitted by publishers and copyright law.

The Leeds Beckett repository holds a wide range of publications, each of which has been checked for copyright and the relevant embargo period has been applied by the Research Services team.

We operate on a standard take-down policy. If you are the author or publisher of an output and you would like it removed from the repository, please [contact us](#) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Each thesis in the repository has been cleared where necessary by the author for third party copyright. If you would like a thesis to be removed from the repository or believe there is an issue with copyright, please contact us on [openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

## Weird *farang* thing: Dark tourism in Alex Garland's *The Beach* (1996)

### Introduction

In *The Beach*, the narrator Richard recalls his motivations for becoming a 'traveller':

Collecting memories, or experiences, was my primary goal when I started travelling. I went about it the same way as a stamp-collector goes about collecting stamps, carrying around with me a mental list of all the things I had yet to see or do. Most of the list was pretty banal. I wanted to see the Taj Mahal, Borobudur, the Rice Terraces in Bagio, Angkor Wat. Less banal, or maybe more so, was that I wanted to witness extreme poverty. I saw it as a necessary experience for anyone who wanted to appear worldly and interesting.

Of course witnessing poverty was the first to be ticked off the list. Then I had to graduate to the more obscure stuff. Being in a riot was something I pursued with a truly obsessive zeal, along with being tear-gassed and hearing gunshots fired in anger.

Another list item was having a brush with my own death.<sup>1</sup>

The most telling moment in this dark travel itinerary is Richard's recognition that his putatively less 'banal' aims, described in terms of graduation toward 'more obscure' and compelling experiences, are 'maybe more so'. Richard notes that his taste for violence is not unique or authentic to him but is instead another, alternative, tourist 'goal'. His acknowledgement complicates Roger Bowen's view that 'Richard still believes the world is sufficiently adaptable to accommodate his fantasies'.<sup>2</sup> Rather, Richard's absorption in a violent travel experience despite his awareness of its banality suggests his 'fantasies' are adaptable even if 'the world', as experienced by the tourist, is unable to provide authentic 'memories, or experiences'.

Richard's journey enables him to tick off his final 'list item' a few times over. His discovery of an apparent paradise--a legendary beach, free of the trappings of tourism, and populated by a small community of young westerners--precipitates a string of violent episodes. Following the suicide of Daffy Duck, who in creating his map begins Richard's

journey, Richard witnesses death on the shores at Hat Rin, in the mangled corpses of Zeph, Sammy and their co-travellers, and in his own apparent mercy killing of Christo following ashark attack. All of these events move beyond quotidian tourist experience, and would seem to fulfil Richard and his fellow beach-residents' hopes for their travels to be, in the words of Étienne, 'something different'.<sup>3</sup> Previous studies interpret the bloodletting in *The Beach* as violent realities ushered in by Richard who, by copying Daffy's map for Zeph and Sammy, onsets triggers? the destruction of the supposedly idyllic island retreat, mirroring the work of independent travel guides that paradoxically claim to advise the prospective masses on leaving the beaten track.<sup>4</sup> Bearing in mind Richard's caveat that the desire for violence is perhaps more banal than other, safer, travel objectives, I offer a different interpretation of these passages. By observing that the experience of danger and war are commoditised in south-east Asian tourism, I argue that the violent passages of Richard's narrative are too, like beautiful beaches and banana pancakes, part of the circulation of imagery which sustains tourism in Thailand and elsewhere in south-east Asia. As Richard seeks adventure beyond the fully commoditised structures of 'independent travel',<sup>5</sup> his ironic and illusory 'escape' comes by buying into another, perhaps more niche, forms of tourism centred on violence. Published and set in the years immediately following the first scholarly discussions of dark tourism, *The Beach* is a study of the psychological, social and economic conditioning that allows travellers to embrace spectacles of disaster and death.<sup>6</sup>

To a greater extent than earlier interpretations centring on *The Beach*'s recapitulation (whether ironic or unintentional) of touristic or imperialistic modes, this approach reveals the supersession of reality and fantasy both in Garland's novel and in contemporary cultural practices of dark tourism. Richard's dark tourism is revealed to be a symbolic fulfilment of the desire for authentically scarring experience, one which ironically negates any encounters with 'the real' and instead consolidates a simulated reality of war and violence. This

simulation is embraced by Thais as well as foreign travellers precisely because it meets with the latter's pre-packaged expectations. Nonetheless, because it fulfils the expectations of the masses, dark tourism also highlights its own hyperreality, as indicated in Richard's fleeting recognition that his plans are 'pretty banal'. Indeed, as it moves beyond old distinctions of "the real" and "the imaginary", dark tourism captures how, in the terminology of Jean Baudrillard, the "fatal" becomes the "banal". Disastrous events become banal, and banality performs the "fatal" work of flattening out experience and meaning.<sup>7</sup> In the next section, drawing upon sociological and theoretical frameworks of dark tourism and social and cultural studies of south-east Asian tourism, I read *The Beach* as a meditation on the desire for immersion in preconceived experiences of dangerous otherness. Garland contemplates the perspective of a privileged generation seeking adventure through the pages of the *Lonely Planet*, and desensitised to historical violence and warfare by video gaming, the cultural mythologies of war--not least popular cinematic representation of the Vietnam War--and what Baudrillard terms the hyperreality of the Gulf War of 1990-91.<sup>8</sup> The novel further hints at the development of a south-east Asian tourist sector that caters to low-budget westerners for whom war and genocide is prominent in the region's cultural heritage. Though the narrative is restricted to Richard's warped viewpoint, I argue in the final section of this essay that the novel's perspective on tourism is not so blinkered. The plot depends on Thai characters who facilitate Richard's travels yet remain, perhaps willingly, marginalised in his understanding thereof. The Thais are part of this novel's multifaceted exploration of dark tourism from the angles of supply and demand, profiting (however misguidedly or self-harmfully) from westerners' desire for hyperreal experience through the perception of their endangerment. As such they are a reminder of the need for culturally and historically specific understandings of travel in the shadow zones.

### Paint it Black: Backpacker Tourism in South-East Asia and *The Beach*

In the conclusion to *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster*, John Lennon and Malcom Foley consider possible futures for dark tourism, highlighting a growing demand for interactive activities. Examples they give are simulations of famous ‘final journeys’ in homage to *RMS Titanic* and Diana, Princess of Wales.<sup>9</sup> Despite mentioning certain south-east Asian tourist sites, they overlook that this region has for decades offered a range of dark, simulacral experiences including hands-on encounters with violent death, such as the River Kwai Bridge tours at Kanchanaburi, Thailand, and Cambodia’s Tuol Sleng Museum of Human Genocide (Phnom Penh) and tours of the ‘Killing Fields’.<sup>10</sup> Though none of these sites are referred to explicitly in Richard’s narrative, the latter impinges upon it in his vision, inspired by Daffy Duck, of ‘a pile of dead Cambodians’, and in a conversation during the Rice Run about the meanings of the word ‘Kampuchea’.<sup>11</sup> Lived experience and bloody history blur most fully in Richard’s summoning of Vietnam, or to be more precise the destination that Victor Alneng terms ‘(the) Vietnam (War)’.<sup>12</sup> *The Beach*’s short first chapter, ‘Boom Boom’, a fragmentary, channel-surfer’s digest of Vietnam-War trivia, foretells the journey’s end. Increasingly, with Daffy’s encouragement, Richard sees Vietnam in, and instead of, the Thai beach. Whereas previous studies interpret Daffy Duck as the vengeful ghost of ‘independent travel’,<sup>13</sup> in my reading Daffy is an agent of the dark tourist gaze, encouraging Richard to paint it black:

“Where are you?” [Daffy] repeated.

I covered my face with my hands. “I’m in Thailand.”

“Where?”

“Thaila...”

“Where?”

Through the cracks between my fingers, I stole a glance down to the DMZ. My shoulders slumped as I got the gist: “... Vietnam.”

“Vietnam!” A great crowing grin spread across his features. “You said it! You *wanted* it! And now these are the breaks! In Country, losing your shit comes with the territory!” He whooped and slapped his thigh. “Fuck it, man, you should be welcoming me! I’m the proof you made it! Rich, I *am* your lost shit! Viet-fuckin’-*nam*!”<sup>14</sup>

In his imaginary travel to the Vietnam War, Richard tours in the footsteps of the ‘Doi Moi’ reforms toward a socialist market economy, as part of which the Sixth Party Congress of the ruling Communist Party in Vietnam commoditised the American War to raise tourist revenue. Tourism development in Vietnam between 1995 and 2010 was strategically focused on this aspect of the country’s history, producing attractions primarily in cities, including the Army Museum in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh Museum, the War Crimes Museum, and War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, and, just outside this city, the Cu Chi Tunnels.<sup>15</sup> The tunnels were part of the vast underground network used by North Vietnamese fighters during the war. At the Ben Dinh site they have in recent years been widened to accommodate (larger) western-sized tourists. In her account of the tunnels’ rapid development as a tourist attraction in the early 1990s, Joan C. Henderson comments that Vietnamese war tourism avoids battle re-enactments because of their inappropriateness ‘in a situation where many participants are still living and memories of pain, grief and suffering are strong’. Yet she also notes that tourists can end their Cu Chi tour by attending a local firing range to shoot replica AK-47 rifles. While some tourists are emotionally moved by the tunnels, many fail to engage with them in meaningful fashion, creating a playful atmosphere which verges on ‘mindlessness’.<sup>16</sup>

Doimoi was indirectly aided by independent tourist businesses such as *The Lonely Planet*. The edition of the guidebook that Alneng analyses dedicates more than 50 pages to the war, with just two and a half pages covering events since 1975. Tourism in Vietnam was thus geared in large part toward ‘Western low-budget tourists, often called “travellers” or “backpackers”, who, due to their age, have had images of Vietnam simultaneously informed

by re-runs of actual footage of the TV-war and by Hollywood films'.<sup>17</sup> The generation of backpackers to which Richard belongs moreover witnessed US-led conflict in the Gulf under the simulacral conditions of media and technological orchestration of war. Besides Baudrillard's discussion of the Gulf War, his interpretation of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), 'complet[ing] the mass-spectacle effect of' the Vietnam War through its excesses of production and insufficiencies of critical distance from the conflict also informs a critical model for dark tourist events which do not simply 'take place' but are pre-packaged by the image of the event and further overwhelm 'the real' by means of mass consumption.<sup>18</sup>

In *The Beach* Richard recalls mild interest in the Gulf War 'just to see what would happen'.<sup>19</sup> His version of war as TV in-the-making is symptomatic of the conditioning that enables Richard to relish his travels among what Alneng calls the 'phantasms' of war, as (dis)embodied in the novel by Daffy.<sup>20</sup> The narrative of his journey draws freely upon a repository of popular cultural representations of and references to the Vietnam War, including *M\*A\*S\*H*,<sup>21</sup> *Apocalypse Now*, *Rambo* and *The A-Team*, casually blurring history, geography and ethnicity so that, by the novel's close, he and Jed refer to the island farmers as 'the VC' (Vietcong), and the area Richard patrols becomes the 'DMZ' (demilitarised zone). Echoing the slang-term used by US GIs in Vietnam, the beach community refer to anything outside of the beach as 'the world'. Jed's first description of Richard as a newcomer, a 'FNG' (Fucking New Guy), reveals that Richard is not alone in using this vocabulary. Richard rejects the suggestion that he is a greenhorn ironically by claiming experience based on his consumption of popular cultural texts about the Vietnam War.<sup>22</sup> The islanders' terminology illustrates that the televisual becomes the real, and speaks through and 'watches' the viewer.<sup>23</sup>

Richard's second encounter with one farmer of 'kick-boxer build' encapsulates the dark tourist gaze that he develops during his travel:

The man was facing away from me at a three-quarter angle, with one arm resting on his rifle and the other on his hips. Across his tattoo, running from his neck to the left side of his ribcage, was a deep, pale scar. Another scar cut a white line across the cropped hair on his head. A crumpled packet of KrongThip was tied to his upper arm with a filthy blue bandana. He held his AK as casually as a snake-charmer holding a cobra. He was perfect... If only I could have frozen time I'd have circled him like a statue in a museum, taking my time, noting his posture and listing the items he carried, studying his eyes to read what was happening behind them.<sup>24</sup>

In the act of narration, of course, the man is 'frozen in time' by Richard's pseudo-naturalist perspective. (In the preceding paragraph Richard describes the farmer's tattoos as his 'markings'.) Yet, in his desire to inspect the farmer 'like a statue in a museum', Richard ironically fails to realise that the details of the man which appeal to him are those commonly found in films, novels and museums pertaining to the war. Whether or not his gun is really an AK47, w

hat makes the man 'perfect' is the *darktourist* gaze as it centres in on those dark aspects of his appearance that Richard is primed to see, the markings of simulation. The depiction ultimately conveys the de-materialising experience of sightseeing in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, as described by Alneng: 'To many visitors the [War Remnants Museum, Ho Chi Minh City] version of the war has no realistic duration, context or configuration in time and space simply because Vietnam, as they know and enjoy it, lacks a realistic duration, context and configuration in time and space'.<sup>25</sup>

At times, Richard and his peers show awareness that their beach 'isn't really Thailand, considering there's no Thais'.<sup>26</sup> The Thai setting matters to Richard's dark tourist fantasy, however, and despite claims to the contrary by some critics which I consider in the following section. Bowen notes that Thai peoples and places have simulated Vietnam in 'countless' western films, while Rodanthi Tzanelli's longer historical perspective points to Thailand's long-running 'symbolic subjection' to the tourist gaze, under which it conformed



to western models of ‘progress’ while maintaining political independence.<sup>27</sup> As Garland identifies in an interview with Ron Gluckman, the novel targets this continuing mediation of Thailand by late-twentieth-century travellers who treat their destination as ‘part of a huge theme park, the scenery for their trip’. Garland states his opposition to the ‘Vietnam War-infatuation’ in Asian tourism that stems in large part from ‘Hollywood button pushing’.<sup>28</sup> Yet the material development of Thai tourism is more closely interwoven with the history of the Vietnam War than this comment implies. Thai tourism grew significantly thanks to the influx of US aid spent on infrastructure, especially roads. Tourist services proliferated in response to the stationing of US soldiers in Thailand’s northeastern provinces, on Rest and Recreation in Bangkok, and later as a popular destination for US veterans. The extraordinary growth in Thai tourism in the 1980s was out of these old structures inherited from imperial war. Notwithstanding efforts by the Tourism Authority of Thailand to redirect tourism towards ‘cultural heritage’, this aspect of Thai history, alongside other (though not unrelated) insalubrious aspects of its society and culture, such as the sex and drug trades, remained a significant draw for westerners.<sup>29</sup> *The Beach* hints at these deeper-running connections of Thai tourism to the Vietnam War in its relatively brief descriptions of mainstream backpacker networks. Among the many sights, sounds and smells of Khao San Road, the centre of the backpacking industry in Bangkok, for instance, Richard focuses in on: ‘Platoon. Jimi Hendrix, dope, and rifle barrels’. On a tourist bus to Ko Samui Richard imagines himself to be part of a squadron heading for a tour of duty.<sup>30</sup> These moments reveal that Richard is primed to see Vietnam in Thailand even before his journey to a seemingly unpopulated beach enables a fuller indulgence in his fantasies of war. Or in the words of Baudrillard that align well with Garland’s novel: ‘[t]he territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory--*precession of simulacra*--that engenders the territory’.<sup>31</sup>

To some extent Richard is identifiable as John Urry's 'post-tourist': 'Post-tourists find pleasure in the multiplicity of tourist games. They know that there is no authentic experience, that there are merely a series of games or texts that can be played'.<sup>32</sup> The intensity of Richard's fantasy is, however, symptomatic of his total immersion in his experience, an immersion which enables him to overlook the parodic properties of post-tourism in favour of something more weighty, scarring, and dangerous. The blurring of apparently objective reportage, intertextuality, and fantasy in Richard's narrative conveys the heady simulacral experience offered by dark tourism in south-east Asia, a highly mediated gaze upon recent, raw history in which interactivity and recreation may be found at the expense of reflection. Following Richard Sharpley's analysis of the different 'shades' of dark tourism, Richard subscribes to 'darkest' or 'black' tourism in which 'a fascination with death is provided for by the purposeful supply of experiences'.<sup>33</sup> Richard moves beyond passive and/or ludic consumption of objects, and even reflexive engagement with sites/sights, into active—and perhaps unreflexive—recreation. "Real" violence and death are effaced not by the acknowledgment of the tourist fantasy but by the endless perpetuation of the myth.<sup>34</sup>

Having explored in this section the cultural conditioning of Richard's dark tourist narrative, I want in the following section to consider in more detail the role played by Thais in facilitating his experience.

### No Thais?

Critics contend that Garland ignores Thai society and culture in *The Beach*. 'Thailand', writes James Annesley,

is not, it seems, a real country, but a place that only exists to provide Garland with an exotic background and a source of metaphors for an escapist fantasy. The result is that the Thai ends up, representing, in terms almost too predictable to recount, a mysterious other against which Richard and the rest of the beach community define themselves.

Annesley thinks that *The Beach* offers ‘a clichéd account of the impact of globalization’, which stresses the McDonaldisation of Thai culture. In doing so, he continues, Garland exhibits a salvage mentality which admonishes economic development in Thailand and prevents any discussion of the harsher realities of the tourist boom in south-east Asia, such as its sex industry. It thereby ‘tends to privilege older structures linked to imperialism’, which emphasise differences between East and West to the material benefit of the latter.<sup>35</sup> As I proceed to analyse the Thai characters, I want to consider whether reading *The Beach* in the framework of dark tourism complicates this position. As Garland spelled out in response to early reviews: ‘A lot of the criticism of “The Beach” is that it presents Thais as two dimensional, as part of the scenery. That’s because these people I’m writing about--backpackers--really only see them as part of the scenery. They don’t see them or the Thai culture[...]That’s the point”’.<sup>36</sup> Support for Garland’s pessimism is found in Dimitri Doganis’s *The Real Beach* (2000), a film which endorses Garland’s novel as an historical document. In *The Real Beach*, Doganis, who, like Garland, was among the earliest generation to visit the backpacker resorts on Koh Phangan, recounts through interviews the early days of tourism on the island. Doganis’s interviewees provide stories of drugs, guns, murder, and other evidence that Richard’s narrative is less removed from reality than we may suppose. In fact, the relation of *The Real Beach* to *The Beach* is complex because, produced on the eve of the release of Danny Boyle’s film adaptation, its contributors may well have recalled and reinterpreted their experiences in light of Garland’s novel. *The Real Beach* thus affirms that *The Beach* itself is now part of the mediation of travel in Thailand—the movie precedes ‘the real’. Even so, one contributor to the film highlights the blinkeredness of the young backpackers: ‘That’s part of the naivety. That we descended on the island and didn’t really see it in its entirety... That we didn’t really consider how it affected the people who lived there and how their lives were quite hard’.<sup>37</sup> In light of this comment, and Richard’s

unreliable narrative fixation upon war, it is possible to interpret Garland's beach with no Thais as merely an emergent tourist destination which Richard, in failing to comprehend Thais living and working there, 'didn't really see ... in its entirety'. Yet the Thais are not simply overlooked. Rather, their absence consolidates Richard's construction of place.

While critics such as John Hatcher note that the ethnocentrism of the narrative is certainly more Richard's than it is Garland's, Thais in the novel still appear as little more than 'comic appendages to the backpacker world'.<sup>38</sup> 'Apart from an interview with a policeman at the start of the narrative and a violent encounter with drug-runners who share their island with the Beach community', writes Alex Tickell, 'all the significant characters in Garland's text are American, Australian, or European'.<sup>39</sup> Drawing upon Alex Woloch's insights into functions of minor characters in novels, it is possible to query on what measure 'significance' is here rated. Woloch argues that minor characters draw attention to the gap between the novel's 'story' and its 'discourse', enabling the reader 'to construct a story...that is at odds with, or divergent from, the formed patterns of attention in the discourse'.<sup>40</sup> While Woloch's main concern is with examining the interplay of minor and major characters as it expresses the tension between democratic and hierarchical social systems in the nineteenth century, his approach lends itself to what Edward W. Said calls a 'contrapuntal' analysis of novels that sound out the perspectives and cultures that they marginalise.<sup>41</sup> The Thais are undeniably apportioned small amounts of 'character space', yet they play hidden, important roles in delivering Richard's experience. Thus the narrative's 'priorit[is]ation of] the authority of the European in (the) place of the Other' can be read ironically, as a condition imposed by and on the dark tourist immersed in violent game-play.<sup>42</sup> Where the novel shows previously unacknowledged levels of sophistication is in hinting, at the level of the story, that Thais might help maintain these fantasies and to conceal the economies of scale that threaten the traveller's belief in his or her hyperreal encounter with death.

Thais in *The Beach* are self-consciously authored as ‘others’. They are negations of the individuals that Richard encounters. Richard’s physical description of the elderly woman who cleans the Bangkok hostel in which he stays, for example, is limited to the following, Conradian details: ‘Her teeth were either black and rotten or yellow as mustard: it looked like she had a mouth full of wasps’. When she tries to clean a live light bulb with a wet mop, he mimes the perils of her actions. To this act she responds in a backpacker pidgin tongue: ‘Hey man... It cool... Chill ... No worry’. As he struggles ‘to accept the union of Thai crone and hippy jargon with grace’, the cleaner points out to Richard the map that Daffy has pinned to his door.<sup>43</sup> In her physical appearance, dangerous behaviour and discordant speech, the cleaner appears to exemplify Annesley’s criticism that Thais are but ‘metaphors for an escapist fantasy’ to Richard, and symbols of the degradation of Thai culture by global capitalist forces which Richard feels he must escape in pursuit of ‘Eden’.<sup>44</sup> She also functions as the gatekeeper in Richard’s particular version of the generic quest narrative. In this respect she is reminiscent of the two elderly women who knit a seemingly endless black yarn at the start of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), another text to which *The Beach* comically and explicitly nods.<sup>45</sup> Precisely because of her crude symbolism, the maid should be read ironically as a sign of Richard’s failure to comprehend the economic realities of the backpacker industry--hence, perhaps, the significance of the author’s choice of a low-wage labourer in this important role. Garland highlights the blindness of Richard to his complicity with the exploitations of the industry that he looks down upon. He illustrates how ‘souvenirs of the tourist economy’ such as the clichéd image of the Thai washerwoman ‘are all fetishised and obfuscated relations between really existing peoples’ (a conditioning which John Hutnyk, whose words I quote, explores in the Calcuttan context in great depth).<sup>46</sup>

Beside the washerwoman, other Thais play a pivotal role in the development of the plot despite, and possibly because of, the ethnocentrism of the protagonists. In Bangkok, the

police only ask basic questions about the death of Daffy before allowing Richard to continue his journey. A Ko Samui hotel worker witnesses the travellers' drug-taking 'with a wan smile'. The 'spiv' boat-owner who delivers Richard, Françoise and Étienne on an island near to the nature reserve is another crucial enabler of the journey.<sup>47</sup> These figures are, to use Woloch's terminology, 'workers' who help the plot along, rather than 'eccentrics' who interrupt proceedings, although the spiv certainly has the potential to undermine Richard's fantasy.<sup>48</sup> In his 'drainpipe marbled jeans tucked into giant Reebok trainers', the spiv is described by Richard as another mongrel by-product of the tourist influx to Thailand, which the narrator struggles to compute. All the same, Richard is not above using his services. Indeed, the encounter with the spiv highlights some of the contradictions of Richard's simulated 'escape' from commercial backpacking. This guide is selected by Étienne on the basis that, as an independent, small-scale entrepreneur, he will not be concerned or surprised by their plan to travel off the main tourist routes. In fact, the boatman is up to date on the travel restrictions to the islands off Chaweng ('my friend, your guide book is no longer correct'), but he uses this information to secure a better deal for himself by breaking restrictions on travel to the marine park. His complicity with the illegal plans suggests the banality of Richard's and his friends' adventure. Both the western travellers and the spiv are happy to rely on stereotypical knowledge of one another as they mutually profit from their exchange.<sup>49</sup>

The largest group of Thais Richard discusses at any length are the dope farmers who live on the island's upper plateau. These, too, are the subject of Richard's othering gaze. Yet in the novel's ending the dope farmers do more than simply break up the party on the beach. They burst the ethnocentric bubble surrounding Sal and her commune by reminding the westerners they exist on the island at their neighbours' discretion. Just as other Thais have guided Richard to the beach and profited from this, the farmers have permitted and monitored his dope-stealing and war games. By remaining in the background of his adventure, they have

indulged his fantasies, and his fetishised understandings of Asians. As such they have helped to author their own image in Richard's narrative. Having played their part in his war-games in the marijuana fields, only when Richard's actions threaten their industry do they enter the beach. When the farmers descend on the beach at the novel's close Richard sees them in a new light. No longer the 'perfect' symbols of dangerous otherness, 'VC'-like mercenaries, he notices that their leader wears 'Reeboks, like the KoSamui spiv'. As Annesley notes, the trainers are a reminder that the island is part of the same global industry which Richard and the other westerners think they have abandoned.<sup>50</sup> Ultimately, he is unable to sustain his fantastical account of the dope farmers. Even while spying on them in the island 'jungle', just before the murder of Zeph and Sammy, he admits that 'most of the guards were more likely country boys than experienced mercenaries, with scars from sharp corals rather than from knife fights. A bit like the real VC'.<sup>51</sup> 'A bit like the real VC' --if this pessimistic quest narrative, which Garland describes as 'anti-travel', lays any claim to the Enlightenment view of travel as a morally and intellectually educative act, then it is perhaps found in this quiet moment of recognition of 'the real' histories and peoples that Richard's fantasy dissimulates as he travels in Thailand.<sup>52</sup> And yet what Richard calls the 'real VC' are, as the label 'VC' implies, invariably the stuff of western myth about Vietnam. There is no exit from the island of simulacra.

In the climactic encounter between the farmers and beach-dwellers, the novel exposes the ethnocentrism of Richard's dark travels. Richard's self-perception changes in response. When he and his friends depart from their island idyll, a group of fishermen collect them from their raft in the Gulf of Thailand and carry them back to the mainland. The passage further reveals the dissimulation on which his adventure is based:

A few hours after dawn broke, a fishing boat came to check us out. And after a bit of banter they towed us back to Ko Samui. It was extraordinary. They didn't seem more than cheerfully curious about who we were and what we were doing on a raft in the Gulf of Thailand. The only thing that raised an

eyebrow was my cuts. By which I mean, a raised eyebrow was the full extent of their reaction. We were just another bunch of weird *farang*, doing the weird kind of things that *farang* do.<sup>53</sup>

Of course, Richard's narcissism is again asserted in his incredulity at the fishermen's lack of interest in him. Paradoxically, though, it is in his acknowledgement of their mutual miscomprehension that Richard is at his most reflexive, and comes closer to an empathetic understanding of the Thais whose lives are touched if not shaped by the tourist industry. The fishermen's casual unconcern with backpackers' lives offers the same kind of deliberate withdrawal found in the dope farmers' allowing the beach to exist. These passages imply that Thais in Garland's novel help to create the conditions for Richard's adventure by maintaining mutual miscomprehension, and fostering an image of otherness, which keeps the westerners in their place.

## Conclusion

While Annesley is right to be suspicious of the outdated and ethnocentric McDonaldisation thesis, and the resulting image of mongrel, cultureless Thailand that it yields, this thesis cannot be attributed to Garland's book. In the space that separates Garland from Richard, and in the structural importance of Thai characters to the novel's plot, the author imparts a complicated understanding of the economic, social and cultural conditions of his characters' journeys.<sup>54</sup> Rather than representing Asian postcolonial spaces as exoticised commodities for western consumption, *The Beach* portrays young western travellers as a banally exotic sub-sector of society in Asia. This blurring of the banal and the exotic echoes Baudrillard's confusion of the banal and the fatal and perhaps identifies the broader postmodern social and cultural contexts in which dark tourism thrives. It leads, in Richard's narrative, to violent fantasies, a focus informed by the development of simulacral experience of World War II, the Vietnam War, and the Khmer Rouge that developed in south-east Asian tourist trails in the late-twentieth century. The importance of this context in shaping *The Beach* is all the more



evident for the fact that no characters in the novel identify and narrate it themselves. All are prey to forces of the tourist gaze that the novel implicitly recognises.

It is this same force which spills out beyond the novel, shaping its consumption, interpretation, film adaptation, and the subsequent tourism thereby generated. Having itself been pre-packaged by the *Lonely Planet*, *Apocalypse Now*, and other texts, in the late 1990s *The Beach* entered the rucksacks of a generation of independent travellers to south-east Asia. By the time it was adapted in Boyle's film of 2000, starring Leonardo DiCaprio, the novel had become paraphernalia of the unimaginative mainstream culture of backpacking that its characters distrust. The novel became as passé as it considers the *Lonely Planet* guidebook to be. As a best-seller, *The Beach* affirmed its own postmodern proposal that the map precedes the territory--or that as soon as one finds something distinctive, untapped, off-the-map, someone else overhears a conversation, makes a map, publishes the map. In this case the map led to a Hollywood film, sponsored by the Tourism Authority of Thailand, which generated an estimated US\$13 million for the Thai economy, in addition to a reputed payment of 5 million baht by Twentieth Century Fox for development of the island of Ko Phi Phi Leh, Krabi province. Pirate DVDs of *The Beach*, perhaps bought following a 'Beach tour' of the Maya Bay filming site, have become an identifiable souvenir of Thai travel. That the film was staged on the formerly pristine beach on Ko Phi Phi Leh after extensive remodelling to bring it in line with western audiences' conception of an 'ideal' tropical beach caused an environmental controversy, and revealed further ironic adherence to the 'popcolonising' forces that Garland's novel discovers at the heart of dark tourism.<sup>55</sup>

I want to stress that this article does not accept or promote Garland's perspective as a definitive view of dark tourism, a concept regarded with increasing complexity (and scepticism) in terms of the range of practices it covers, not least by the articles that comprise

this volume.<sup>56</sup> While theorists such as Stone and Sharpley explore the possibilities of an overarching model for the consumption of dark tourism, *The Beach*, as a study of the dark tourist urge and the means by which it is satisfied, suggests the need for cultural specificity.<sup>57</sup>

Richard is an historically grounded depiction of a certain type of traveller open to hyperreal experiences of war of a kind provided by tourist agencies in south-east Asia from around the last quarter of the twentieth century. In this context, the cultural practice of dark tourism created violent mythologies of place that permitted western travellers to recuperate a highly relative and qualified sense of authenticity even as its economic viability further endangered this concept. It may be that this practice is restricted to a (post-)Romantic minority of travellers, and that the dark tourist impulse is largely abated in the zones about which I have written. Ngamsorn Rittichainuwat's research of Thai and Scandinavian tourists in Phuket after the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 finds that 'dark' motivations were not widely expressed among Europeans; most travelled to enjoy the region's natural beauty and to assist local recovery operations. Diem-trinh Thi Le and Douglas G Pearce similarly point to varied practical and mainstream motivations among recent tourists in the former battlefields of Vietnam.<sup>58</sup> Richard's dark travel on a fantasy beach may, after all, belong to a particular historical moment, and *The Beach* advises as much in its opening account of Richard that specifies the year in which he was born (one year before the Fall of Saigon): 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of death I will fear no evil, for my name is Richard. I was born in 1974'.<sup>59</sup> All tourist destinations are built upon the shifting sands of consumer demand, and Garland's beach is no different. *The Beach* nevertheless records with rare complexity and insight the sources, expressions, and consequences of the desire for tours 'through the valley of death'.

<sup>1</sup> Alex Garland, *The Beach*. London: Penguin, 1997, pp 163-64. I would like to thank James Collinge and two anonymous reviewers for instructive comments on a draft version of this article.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Bowen, "Journey's End: Conrad as Revenant in Alex Garland's *The Beach*", *Conradiana* 39 (1), 2007, pp 39-57, p 45.

<sup>3</sup> Garland, *The Beach*, p 19

<sup>4</sup> For example, John Hatcher, 'Lonely Planet, Crowded World: Alex Garland's *The Beach*', *Studies in Travel Writing*, 3 (1), 1999, pp 131-147.

<sup>5</sup> Hatcher, 'Lonely Planet'. See also Alex Tickell, 'Footprints on *The Beach*: Traces of Colonial Adventure in Narratives of Independent Tourism', *Postcolonial Studies*, 4 (1), 2001, pp 39-54, pp 42-44; James Annesley, 'Pure Shores: Travel, Consumption, and Alex Garland's *The Beach*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 50 (3), 2004, pp 551-569. See also Garland's own comments in his interview with Ron Gluckman, 'More Postcards from The Beach' (1999), <http://www.gluckman.com/BeachGarland.html>. Last accessed 3 Dec 2013.

<sup>6</sup> The beach is founded in 1989 and Richard travels to it in 1995 (see p 136). For a review of the early- and mid-1990s literature on dark tourism, see Philip Stone and Richard Sharpley, 'Consuming Dark Tourism: A Thanatological Perspective', *Annals of Tourism Research*, 35 (2), 2008, pp 574-595, pp 576-79.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies* (1983), Philip Beitchman and W.G.J. Niesluchowski (tr). London: Pluto, 1990, pp. 11, 57.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Baudrillard, 'Apocalypse Now', in *Simulacra and Simulation*, Sheila Faria Glaser (tr). University of Michigan Press, 1994, pp 59-60; Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1991), Paul Patton (tr). Sydney: Power Publications, 1995. The connection of *The Beach* to Baudrillard has been established in previous studies, including William Stephenson, 'Island of the Assassins: Cannabis, Spectacle, and Terror in Alex Garland's *The Beach*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 46 (4), 2005, pp 369-81, pp 374-75.

<sup>9</sup> John Lennon and Malcolm Foley, *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster*. Andover, Hampshire: Cengage Learning, 2010, pp 163-64

<sup>10</sup> On River Kwai tourism, see Maurizio Peleggi, 'National Heritage and Global Tourism in Thailand', *Annals of Tourism Research* 23 (2), 1996, pp 432-448, p 443. On Cambodia, see Zoltan Istvan, "'Killing Fields' Lure Tourists in Cambodia", *National Geographic Today?*, 10 January 2003, <http://news.nationalgeographic.co.uk/news/pf/3128314.html>. Accessed 15 December 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Garland, *The Beach*, p 147, pp 175-76.

<sup>12</sup> Victor Alneng, "'What the Fuck is a Vietnam?': Touristic Phantasms and the Popcolonization of (the) Vietnam (War)", *Critique of Anthropology*, 22, 2002, pp 461-89.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Hatcher, 'Lonely Planet', p 141.

<sup>14</sup> Garland, *The Beach*, p 323.

<sup>15</sup> Joan C Henderson, 'War as a Tourist Attraction: the Case of Vietnam', *International Journal of Tourism Research* 2 (2000), pp 269-80, pp 271, 272, 276; Alneng, 'Touristic Phantasms'.

<sup>16</sup> Henderson, 'War', pp 276, 277, 278. See also Alneng, 'Touristic Phantasms', pp 473-75, which adds that some tours allow tourists to dress up in 'Viet Cong' pyjamas, while good shots on the firing range receive 'VC' medals and scarves (p 474). For a tourist report on a shooting range outside Phnom Penh, which allegedly used to include live animals among its targets, see Justin Pushman, 'I Want to Shoot Guns', 28 August 2008, <http://www.bootsnall.com/articles/08-08/i-want-to-shoot-guns-phnom-penh-cambodia.html>. Accessed 20 December 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Alneng, 'Touristic Phantasms', pp 470, 462.

<sup>18</sup> Baudrillard, *The Gulf War*; Baudrillard, 'Apocalypse Now', p 59.

<sup>19</sup> Garland, *The Beach*, p 254.

<sup>20</sup> Alneng calls *The Beach* 'a major contribution to the phantasmological understanding of international tourism'. 'Touristic Phantasms', p 468.

<sup>21</sup> In one exchange Daffy and Richard identify that the US TV series *M\*A\*S\*H*, though set in Korea, was really about 'Vietnam. Korea was the excuse' (p 185). Similarly, in *The Beach* Thailand becomes 'the excuse' for Richard's own fantastical Vietnam-War tour.

<sup>22</sup> Garland, *The Beach*, p 255, p 144, p 85, pp 86-87.

<sup>23</sup> Jean Baudrillard, 'Holocaust', in *Simulacra and Simulation*, pp 49-51, at p 51.

<sup>24</sup> Garland, *The Beach*, p 281.

<sup>25</sup> Alneng, 'Touristic Phantasms', p 476.

<sup>26</sup> Garland, *The Beach*, p 127.

<sup>27</sup> Bowen, 'Journey's End', p 46; Rodanthi Tzanelli, 'Reel Western Fantasies: Portrait of a Tourist Imagination in *The Beach* (2000)', *Mobilities* 1 (1), 2006, pp 121-42, pp 129-30.

<sup>28</sup> Gluckman, 'More Postcards'.

<sup>29</sup> Peleggi, 'National Heritage', pp 434-35, 442.

<sup>30</sup> Garland, *The Beach*, p 22, p 37.

- <sup>31</sup> Jean Baudrillard, 'The Precession of Simulacra', in *Simulacra and Simulation*, pp. 1-42, at p. 1. Original emphasis. [RC: DO THE ITLAICS APPEAR IN THE ORIGINAL?] RB: I HAVE CLARIFIED.
- <sup>32</sup> John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*. London: Sage, 1990, p. 11. See Tickell, 'Footsteps', p. 48. Gaming experience of Thailand is mentioned in Maxine Feiffer's discussion of traveller perspectives, in which the term 'post-tourist' was coined. She cites a *Time Out* magazine advertisement for tours in 'Thailand, where you can meet both sides in the guerrilla war on a "trip down the By river, which will make you think you've just changed places with a character from *Apocalypse Now*"'. Maxine Feiffer, *Tourism in History: From Imperial Rome to the Present*. New York: Stein and Day, 1985, p. 260.
- <sup>33</sup> Stone and Sharpley, 'Consuming Dark Tourism', p. 579.
- <sup>34</sup> See Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, p. 11.
- <sup>35</sup> Annesley, 'Pure Shores', pp. 563, 562, 563.
- <sup>36</sup> Gluckman, 'More Postcards'.
- <sup>37</sup> Doganis, Dimitri, dir. *The Real Beach*. October Films, 2000. My transcription.
- <sup>38</sup> Hatcher, 'Lonely Planet', p. 143.
- <sup>39</sup> Tickell, 'Footsteps', p. 45.
- <sup>40</sup> Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003, p. 41.
- <sup>41</sup> Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage, 1993, esp. p. 78.
- <sup>42</sup> Woloch, *The One*; Tickell, 'Footsteps', p. 45.
- <sup>43</sup> Garland, *The Beach*, p. 13-14, p. 14.
- <sup>44</sup> Garland, *The Beach*, p. 58.
- <sup>45</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), edited by Robert Kimbrough. New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1988, pp. 13-14. For further comparisons, see Bowen, 'Journey's End'.
- <sup>46</sup> John Hutnyk, *The Rumour of Calcutta: Tourism, Charity and the Poverty of Representation*. London: Zed Books, 1996, p. 217.
- <sup>47</sup> Garland, *The Beach*, p. 16-17, p. 46, p. 52.
- <sup>48</sup> Woloch, *The One*, p. 25.
- <sup>49</sup> Garland, *The Beach*, p. 52.
- <sup>50</sup> Garland, *The Beach*, p. 424; Annesley, 'Pure Shores', p. 556.
- <sup>51</sup> Garland, *The Beach*, p. 355.
- <sup>52</sup> Garland's description of *The Beach* as 'anti-travel' is in Gluckman, 'More Postcards'.
- <sup>53</sup> Garland, *The Beach*, p. 237-38.; The most basic definition of the Thai term 'farang' is western foreigner. For nuanced discussion, see Tzanelli, 'Reel Western Fantasies', p. 138.
- <sup>54</sup> In its margins, the novel encounters some of the grimmer by-products of tourism in Thailand, albeit from a limited, western perspective. For instance, in the final chapter Richard reports Cassie's arrest for heroin smuggling and her likely execution. More subtly, *The Beach* introduces the subject of the trades in sex and drugs as Richard more than once imagines being tricked into ingesting the blood which runs from the apparition of Daffy's open wrists, an expression of the narrator's perception of the threat of AIDS. The manner in which Richard communicates his anxieties regarding the disease through imagined encounters with Daffy is symptomatic of his paranoia. It also highlights his casual unawareness of Thais, since he fails to consider that Daffy's blood-splattered hotel room, which he fears stepping into, will be cleaned by the Thai maid with whom Richard shares a broken conversation.
- <sup>55</sup> Ron Gluckman, 'Postcards from The Beach' (1999) at <http://www.gluckman.com/Beach.html>. Last accessed 3 Dec 2013; Law, Lisa, Tim Bunnell, and Chin-Ee Ong, 'The Beach, the Gaze and Film Tourism', *Tourist Studies*, 7 (2) 2007, pp. 141-64; Tzanelli, 'Reel Western Fantasies'. I take 'popcolonising' from the title of Alneng, 'Touristic Phantasms'. The Beach tour receives mixed comments among 877 reviews which it had received on tripadvisor.co.uk by 13 November 2013, though more are positive than negative. Critical comments nonetheless bring home the ironies of which I write: for example, 'there were 10 longtail boats and 8 speedboats in the bay when we were there, altogether about 500 people, with lots of noise and chaos, no fun'. See [http://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/ShowUserReviews-g303908-d553587-r160808209-Maya\\_Bay-Ko\\_Phi\\_Phi\\_Don\\_Krabi\\_Province.html](http://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/ShowUserReviews-g303908-d553587-r160808209-Maya_Bay-Ko_Phi_Phi_Don_Krabi_Province.html).
- <sup>56</sup> See also Avital Biran and Yaniv Poria, 'Reconceptualising Dark Tourism', in Richard Sharpley and Philip R. Stone (eds) *Contemporary Tourist Experience: Concepts and Consequences*, New York: Routledge, 2012, pp. 59-70; Richard Sharpley, 'Towards an Understanding of "Genocide Tourism": An Analysis of Visitors' Accounts of their Experience of Recent Genocide Sites', in *Contemporary Tourist Experience*, pp. 95-109.
- <sup>57</sup> Stone and Sharpley, 'Consuming Dark Tourism'.
- <sup>58</sup> Ngamsom Rittichainuwat, 'Responding to Disaster: Thai and Scandinavian Tourists' Motivation to Visit Phuket, Thailand', *Journal of Travel Research* 46 (4), 2008, pp. 422-432. Diem-trinh Thi Le and Douglas G. Pearce, 'Segmenting Visitors to Battlefield Sites: International Visitors to the Former Demilitarized Zone in

---

Vietnam', *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, 28 (4), 2011, pp 451-463. Biran and Poria suggest these empirical studies undermine the assumption of thanatouristic motives for travel to 'dark' tourist sites.

'Reconceptualising Dark Tourism', pp 64-65.

<sup>59</sup>Garland, *The Beach*, p 1.